The Welsh
in Pennsylvania

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The Peoples of Pennsylvania

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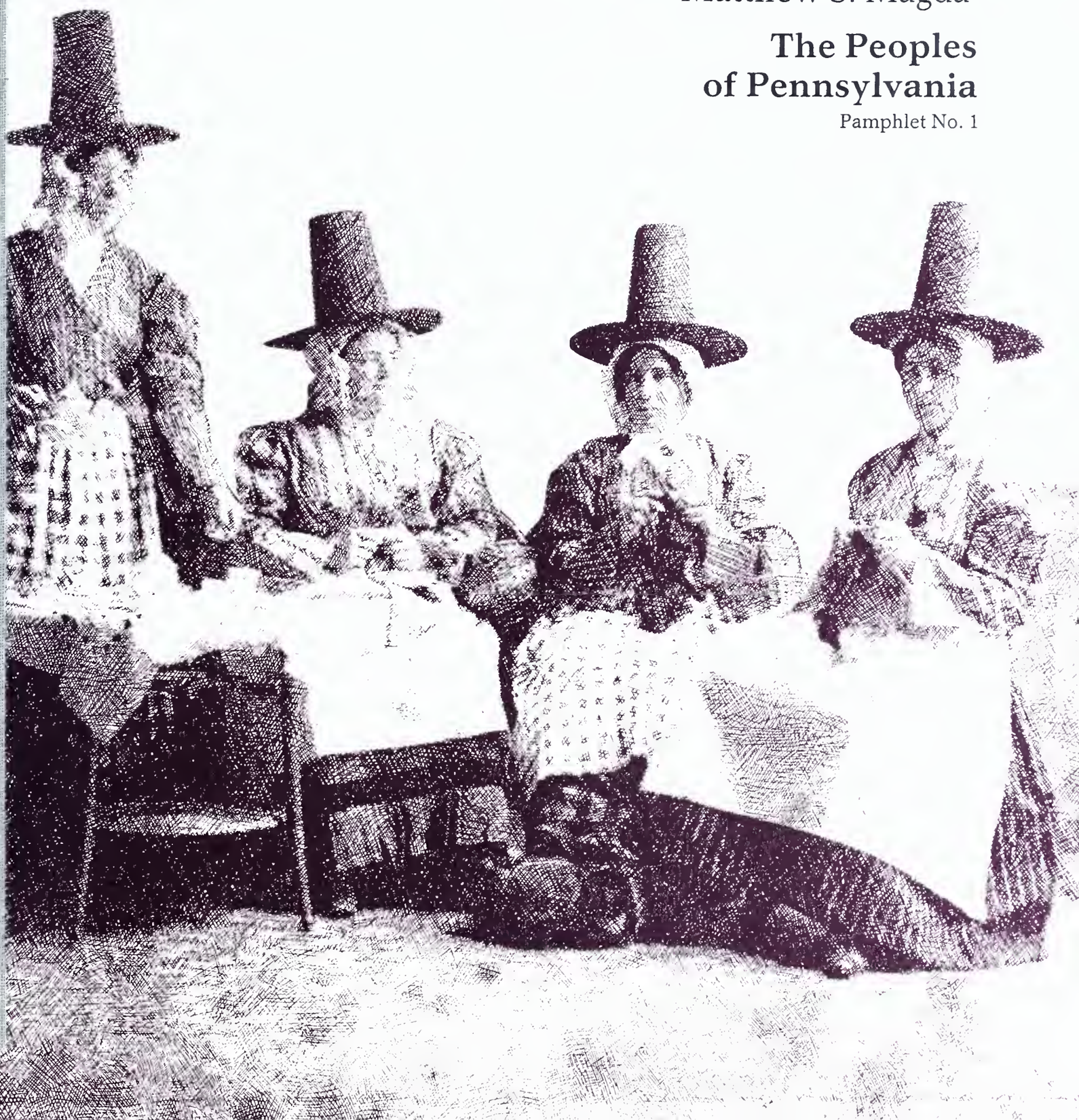

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Foreword

The United States is composed of people from many cultural and national backgrounds. Americans can trace their ancestry to Europeans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Australians and American Indians. Today, our population consists of people from over one hundred ethnic groups.

Since its founding in 1681, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been among the states with the greatest diversity of population. While Pennsylvanians share a common regional and political identity, they also form a mixture of national and ethnic cultures and religious traditions. No history of the Commonwealth would be adequate without coverage of the rich diversity of Pennsylvania's populace.

Thus, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission is publishing these booklets which depict ethnic groups as a means of introducing to the public the history of the many peoples who have made Pennsylvania's history and who have built this great Commonwealth. In this way the Commission continues its efforts to preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of all Pennsylvanians.

Cover: Women in Welsh costume. Courtesy Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia.

Welsh in Pennsylvania

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The Welsh in Pennsylvania

The Welsh have had an impact upon Pennsylvania's society and culture since the founding of the colony in 1681. Several waves of Welsh immigrants—gentry, farmers and, later, industrial workers—came to Pennsylvania and created several dense settlements in various sections of the Commonwealth. The Welsh were especially influential from 1682 to 1730 in shaping the political, economic and social development of the colony.

The Welsh are descendants of the ancient Britons. Their homeland, Wales (in Welsh, *Cymru*), is located in the southwestern part of the isle of Great Britain on a peninsula of around eight thousand square miles which thrusts westward from England into the Irish Sea. Originally a separate kingdom, Wales was united with England in 1536 through a parliamentary Act of Union.

Although Wales was one of the first western nations to be heavily industrialized, its population stayed relatively small. Thus, in comparison to the larger homelands of other American ethnic groups, like Germany, Italy and Poland, which sent massive waves of immigrants to the United States, Wales could never be the source of so great a number. Nonetheless, in Pennsylvania, particularly in the early colonial period, the Welsh were an important and influential ethnic group.

From 1682 to 1700, the Welsh were the largest group immigrating to Pennsylvania. By 1700 they accounted for approximately one-third of the colony's estimated population of twenty thousand. After 1700, Welsh immigration remained significant, yet slowly declined; it practically ceased after 1720, resuming in sizable numbers only in the early nineteenth century.

The Welsh Barony

The mass immigration of Welsh to Pennsylvania before 1700 was due largely to the desire of Welsh Quakers for religious freedom and escape from persecution, and for the creation of a separate colony or "barony" in America. Thus, in part, these Welsh Quakers may have hoped to preserve the language and customs of their homeland. In 1681 several Welsh Quaker gentlemen met with William Penn in London and obtained a tract of forty thousand acres in Pennsylvania. A verbal agreement was reached, reportedly, which assured the Welsh that their settlement would be indivisible and would constitute a "barony" with the right of self-government.

The "Welsh Tract" covered the land north of Philadelphia and west of the Schuylkill River. From the Schuylkill it stretched northwestward along the southwest bank of the river, and westward and southwestward over southeastern Pennsylvania. Although the boundaries of the barony were laid out in 1682, they were not established officially until 1687. In general, its borders covered eleven and one-half townships in Delaware, Chester and Montgomery counties, including Radnor, Haverford, Upper and Lower Merion, West Whiteland, East Westland, Willistown, West and East Goshen, Tredyffrin, part of West Town, and all of East Town. Almost all of the early settlers on this tract were Welsh and the majority were Quakers. Many of the settlers were members of the Welsh gentry and their servants, and the others came from the yeoman class.

The Welsh Quaker exclusiveness of the barony and the hope of exercising separate civil authority on one undivided tract through Quaker meetings did not last long. By 1690 all separate privileges for the Welsh barony were lost within Pennsylvania. Also by that time, Welsh Baptists, Anglicans and Presbyterians, as well as English and German settlers, had established homes on the Welsh Tract.

The first official dismantling of the barony as an entity came in 1685 when the Provincial government ran a boundary line creating Philadelphia and Chester counties, thereby dividing the barony into separate political subdivisions. Then, in 1690, the Provincial government abolished the civil authority of the Quaker meetings in Merion, Radnor and Haverford townships, and in its place set up regular township government. Later, as the population grew, other townships with similar government were created within the barony. Although the Welsh Quakers protested these acts, which they believed had violated their agreement with Penn, they eventually submitted to the changes of government, which they had little power to prevent.

Beyond the Welsh barony, other Welsh communities were established. Of these, Gwynedd Township, in the present Montgomery County, was the most important early mass settlement. Welsh settlers began moving into Gwynedd, also known as North Wales, in 1698. By 1720 the settlement was almost complete, and by 1741 it was one of the most flourishing in the county. Other Welsh flowed into Bucks and Berks counties. Small numbers of Welsh also settled in Lancaster County as early as 1700. By the mid-1700s Welsh settlers had moved in along the Susquehanna frontier.

After 1730 the Welsh gradually became a less significant portion of the colony's populace as other groups, such as the Germans and Scotch-Irish, came into Pennsylvania. By the time of the Revolutionary

War, or no later than 1790, there were approximately twelve thousand people of Welsh ancestry in Pennsylvania. By that time, however, the colony's population had grown to about 250,000. Except for a few isolated communities, the Welsh had generally lost their national identity and had mixed with the English. The most important of the few groups that continued the commemoration of their ethnic origins was the Welsh Society of Philadelphia. Founded in 1729, the society was originally intended to assist poor immigrants from Wales.

The Second Immigrant Wave

A second wave of Welsh immigration, in the nineteenth century, was spurred by poor harvests in Wales during the 1790s. This flow of immigrants was later perpetuated by several other factors. The rural population of Wales increased by two-thirds between 1800 and 1850. Large estates were consolidated and rents were raised, displacing small farmers and their sons. Although the majority of these newly homeless probably migrated to the new industrial districts of Great Britain, such as Liverpool and London, a considerable number migrated to America. Later, during the nineteenth century, the industrial development of Pennsylvania, especially of the coal and iron industries, attracted Welsh industrial workers who were seeking the comparatively high wages available in the United States. Since industrialization had begun in Wales fifty years before it began in America, there was a supply of skilled Welsh industrial workers who were eager to pursue opportunities in the newly rising industries of Pennsylvania.

Perhaps the first significant settlement in Pennsylvania of the second wave of Welsh immigration was founded in 1796 in present Cambria County. Under the leadership of the Rev. Morgan J. Rees (or Rhys) (1760-1804), a Welsh Baptist minister, a group of Welsh immigrants began the present town of Ebensburg and populated the surrounding area. Cambria County owes its name to these immigrants, who named their general settlement in that area after their former home, which was in the mountainous region of Wales. As late as 1873, the Welsh were still the largest ethnic group in Ebensburg and in Cambria Township. Over these years Baptist Church services in the area were conducted in the Welsh language.

The other important Welsh communities settled during this wave of Welsh immigration emerged in the areas of Pennsylvania which experienced intensive development of the coal, iron and steel industries. Welsh workers with industrial skills came to America generally in the following order during the nineteenth century: After 1815, iron puddlers and rollers; after 1830, coal miners; after 1840, slate quarrymen; and after 1890, tin-platers.

The Later Settlement

The anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania became one of the major areas of the later Welsh settlement in the Commonwealth. As early as the 1830s, two Welsh preachers who had come to Carbondale, Pennsylvania, were sent back to Wales by employers to recruit additional miners. From 1840 to 1860, Welsh colliers were sending word home about the wages ($1.00 to $1.50 a day), which were about double what could be earned in Wales. Moreover, a Welsh foreman or mine superintendent could obtain workers for the best jobs simply by writing to his hometown newspaper in Wales. For example, Benjamin Hughes (1824-1900), who served as the general mine superintendent for the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Coal Company during 1865-1899, was largely responsible for the heavy Welsh settlement of the Hyde Park section of Scranton. The prominence of Welsh in the anthracite fields before the 1880s is indicated by the fact that of the 109 miners killed in the famous 1869 breaker fire at the Avondale mine near Wilkes-Barre, at least two-thirds were Welsh.

The growth of the iron and steel and, later, the tin-plate industries prompted the creation of Welsh communities from 1850 to 1910 in such western Pennsylvania cities as Johnstown, Sharon and Pittsburgh. Welsh miners also found jobs after 1840 in western Pennsylvania in the bituminous coal fields. In south central Pennsylvania the slate industry of York County, particularly in the area surrounding the town of Delta, drew Welsh slate quarrymen to settle there.

Decline of Immigration

By the late nineteenth century, however, American industrial technology was catching up to the British, and, consequently, the skilled Welsh worker was finding it more difficult to obtain preferential wages in Pennsylvania, and America in general. There was a gradual abandonment of the better wages which had compensated Welsh millworkers and miners for the dangerous working conditions, long hours, and fast pace of work in Pennsylvania's mines and mills. With the loss of this important incentive for immigration, and with the onset later of World War I, the flow of Welsh immigrants to America never swelled greatly in the years 1890-1910, and thereafter it gradually declined.

The Welsh remained a small ethnic group in America. Whereas hundreds of thousands and even millions from other groups, such as the Poles and Italians, immigrated to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, only 53,768 Welsh arrived in the period 1881 to 1920. Although the Welsh settled in considerable numbers in New

England, the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest during their successive waves of immigration, Pennsylvania was a primary area of settlement. Today the Commonwealth has more people of Welsh ancestry (somewhat more than two hundred thousand) than any other state.

While the trend of the Welsh in Pennsylvania has been primarily toward increasing assimilation into the middle-class culture of Protestant, Anglo-Saxon America, Welsh culture and cultural institutions have flourished occasionally and have, in a few cases, been preserved almost intact.

The Welsh language was the native tongue of most Welsh immigrants, and of most of their American-born children until they entered public school. In some of the dense Welsh settlements of Pennsylvania, such as those in Carbondale and Scranton, the language was preserved by segments of the community. A Welsh-language press thrived in Pennsylvania for over a century, with such newspapers as the *Wasg* of Pittsburgh (1871-1890) and the *Baner America* of Scranton (1866-1877). For the most part, however, the Welsh language disappeared as the second generation grew up speaking English. A battle did occur within the Welsh churches between those who demanded services in Welsh and those who, because they believed their children would not follow a religion preached in a "foreign" language, preferred English-language services. By 1910 most churches had services in English and only rarely were they in Welsh.

The Welsh were especially fond of poetry and they generally admired poets who could compose in either the ancient form, called *cynghanedd,* of strict meters using internal rhyme and alliteration, or in relatively freer modern forms. Welsh poets were given bardic titles. Some places in Pennsylvania produced an extraordinary number of bards. Up to 1910 there were more than fifty bards in Scranton. Consequently, the Hyde Park section of that city became known as the "great Merthyr" and the "Welsh Athens" of America.

The Welsh literary and singing festival or contest, called the *Eisteddfod,* was introduced into America at Carbondale, Pennsylvania, in 1850. The *Eisteddfod* supposedly began in the year 940 when a Welsh chieftain awarded a chair to a victorious bard. The *Eisteddfod* consisted of competition in poetry, essays, orations, recitations, prose translations, and the performance of vocal music by large choirs, trios, soloists and glee parties. Numerous Welsh civic organizations and churches conducted *Eisteddfodau* in America, most often between 1875 and 1915. Five three-hundred-voice choirs from the Pennsylvania coal regions attended the *Eisteddfod* at the Philadelphia bicentennial celebration in 1882 and competed for prizes of up to twelve hundred dollars. A choir from Scranton out-performed the Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and secured the top prize of five thousand dollars.

The *Gymanfa Ganu* (singing assembly) was the other major Welsh cultural festival. It differed from the *Eisteddfod* in that competition was only in the musical field, and in that individual competition was not allowed. This festival was held annually between March 1, St. David's Day, and March 17, St. Patrick's Day. Local church choirs and congregations met for the *Gymanfa Ganu,* which periodically acted as a force to unite the members of the several Welsh Protestant denominations in Pennsylvania's mining and industrial towns. The largest of these festivals have been held by the National *Gymanfa Ganu* Association since 1929.

Individual Accomplishments

Throughout Pennsylvania's history, the Welsh have demonstrated leadership and talent in the fields of politics, business and the arts. The following biographical sketches represent only a small portion of the people of Welsh ancestry who have been prominent in Pennsylvania's past.

In the early years of the Commonwealth, two Welshmen played significant roles in politics. Thomas Lloyd (1640-1694) came to Philadelphia in 1683. He immediately assumed an important position in political and religious affairs. He became land commissioner, president of the Provincial Council and deputy governor. David Lloyd (c.1656-1731) was the greatest lawyer of colonial Pennsylvania, and he may have been the most influential force shaping the Commonwealth's early legislation. He arrived in Philadelphia in 1686, having received a commission from William Penn as attorney general of the colony. In rapid succession he served as clerk of the county court, clerk of the Provincial court and deputy master of the rolls. In 1693 he entered the Pennsylvania Assembly and in 1694 began a lengthy career (lasting until 1730) as speaker of the Assembly. He was instrumental in obtaining the charter which abolished the legislative powers of the appointive Council and reserved them for the elected Assembly, a lawmaking body that was free of influence by Proprietary interests (that is, the Penn family); and in leading the "popular party" in the successful resistance to the efforts of the Governor and the Council to control the judiciary and to interfere with processes within the Assembly. In the twentieth century James John Davis (1873-1947) was an important political figure. He migrated to America from Wales in 1881. Davis served as secretary of labor during the Republican administrations of Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover (1921-1930), and as United States Senator from Pennsylvania (1930-1945).

In the fields of business and industry, David Thomas (1794-1882) came to America and built the first successful hot-blast furnace in the nation at Catasauqua, Pennsylvania, in 1840. As a leader of American ironmasters, he became known as the father of the iron industry. William Johns (1805-1865) migrated to Pennsylvania from Pembrokeshire in his late twenties. After working as a miner, he bought a colliery in 1846 at Saint Clair and through efficient business practices became the richest man in Schuylkill County. Thomas Hamer Watkins (1860-1930) at age fifteen started his own "general market" business in the Pittston area. Although his early venture failed, Watkins became a successful mine operator after 1880. In 1899 he sold his mining operations and thereafter applied his uncanny business skills to supervising his many investments. In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Watkins as the business representative on the famous Anthracite Strike Commission.

Concerning Welsh cultural achievements, Joseph Parry (1841-1903), a former iron-roller in Danville, Pennsylvania, and a youthful victor of *Eisteddfodau* for canons and glees, received a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in London. Afterward, Parry held professorships of music in Wales, and periodically returned to the United States to give concerts and judge *Eisteddfodau*. The Welsh gave Parry the title of chief musician, *Pencerdd America*. William Aubrey Williams, or by bardic title, Gwilym Gwent (1834-1891), became known as the "Mozart" of Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley. Born in Monmouthshire, South Wales, at age thirty-seven Williams came to the Wilkes-Barre area of Pennsylvania, where he worked in several mines until his death. He composed many of his musical pieces in the mines, where he wrote musical notes on the pit props and trams. Altogether, Williams composed and published over one hundred works consisting of popular glees, anthems and cantatas. He spent his last twenty years in Pennsylvania conducting brass bands and choirs.

In general, then, as we look back on the sweep of Pennsylvania's past, we can see that the Welsh have to a significant degree affected this State's history and culture, and that Welsh immigrants and their progeny have made substantial contributions to the political, social and economic development of this Commonwealth. The Welsh exercised great influence during the early years of the colonial period, founded important communities in parts of the State, lent valuable skills to the State's industries, and helped enrich the literary and musical heritage of Pennsylvania.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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